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ABSTRACT

Parents of Mexican American children can provide vital information regarding the education of their gifted children. They can become involved in identifying giftedness once the characteristics are agreed upon. Parents may then request assessment of their child to ascertain whether placement in a special program is appropriate. Parents must give permission for testing. Once the assessment results are considered in a placement decision, parents must also approve the final action. In programming, parents of minority children can help teachers capitalize on the child's cultural background. Parent involvement may be direct (participation in the classroom) or indirect (through communication with the school and/or teacher). (CL)

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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE IDENTIFICATION
OF GIFTED MEXICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

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Given a normal distribution, 5% of the population of any cultural group in any society could be defined as gifted or talented. However, minorities do not comprise anywhere near 5% of the students being served in gifted programs in most American schools. This lack of representation is probably due to a variety of factors, but for the purposes of this paper, the role of the family in the identification of gifted Mexican American children will be addressed. As defined by the New Mexico Standards for Special Education (1982), a gifted child is one who is identified as possessing abilities that give evidence of outstanding performance capability in areas such as intelligence, critical thinking, creativity, or academics.

Generally speaking, however, parents of gifted children, and especially minority parents, often have no training or little information to help them identify their child's giftedness and special needs. The importance of the family in this identification process has been overlooked by researchers and educators. Only recently has the literature addressed the relationships between families and schools. Minuchin (1967) described the family as "a microcosmic system which develops roles and rules that are intended to maintain, enhance, and perpetuate the system within the larger context of community and culture" (p. 51). Lightfoot (1981) has said that "families continue to offer the greatest potential for cultural cohesion and continue to perform the most complex, subtle, and difficult... task...of socialization" (p. 97).

In culturally different families, especially Mexican American families, because of the traditional extended family network, the family not only provides socialization and cultural cohesion but a sense of support, strength,

and acceptance for all family members. While parents are providing a supportive, loving home atmosphere there is much that they can do to help the schools with the early identification of their child's giftedness or talents. Since parents know their children best, their observations of the child and the reporting of those observations to teachers, diagnosticians, or other experts will facilitate the identification of the gifted child, assessment, and his/her placement in a special program.

Identification

Early identification is extremely important for all gifted children but especially for minority children. The high drop-out rate of minority students indicates that a greater number of gifted Mexican American children are alienated by their experiences in a nonresponsive educational system than their white middle-class counterparts (Bernal, 1974).

Involving minority parents in the identification process of their child is important because each cultural group has its own perceptions of giftedness. In his cross-cultural study of giftedness in the Mexican American community, Bernal (1974) found that characteristics attributed to the gifted Mexican American child were of a behavioral nature instead of the traditional view of intelligence. Data from the interviews revealed that the Mexican American community did not make a clear distinction between giftedness and talent, as has been found in the literature. Instead, the distinction occurred in the behavior of gifted children as they interacted with an adult at an adult level or exhibited a distinct style as well as intelligence (Clark, 1981, p. 27).

In the identification process, all school districts have well-defined criteria for identifying exceptional children and for making referrals for assessment purposes. The "signals" which indicate giftedness are generally

related to the U.S. Office of Education or state generated definitions of giftedness and to descriptors outlined by researchers in the field. Hall and Skinner (1980) have developed a list of characteristics which parents may observe and bring to the attention of school personnel. It includes the following behaviors:

1. Has displayed unusual talent in music, drawing, rhythms, or other art forms.
2. Asks many "intelligent questions" about topics in which young children do not ordinarily have an interest.
3. Keen observation and retention of information about things he or she has observed.
4. The ability to concentrate for a longer period of time than other children his or her age.
5. An early interest in clocks and calendars, and an ability to understand their function.
6. The early accurate use of a large vocabulary.
7. Spoke in entire sentences at an unusually early age.
8. The ability to tell or reproduce stories and events with great detail at an early age.
9. Carries on intelligent conversations with older children and adults.
10. Learned to read early with little or no formal teaching.
11. Can write short stories, poems, letters (pp. 7-9).

Assessment

Based on their observations, parents who suspect giftedness in their children may directly request assessment for purposes of better defining their child's abilities/potential and for possible placement in a special program.

While each state has different criteria for identifying gifted children, most have developed a list of characteristics which indicate giftedness or

talent, and which become the basis for referral for assessment. Once the child has been referred, it is required by law (PL 93-112 and PL 94-142) that parents give their permission for testing. It has been noted that many problems may evolve in the assessment of minority gifted children and subsequently in the roles of their parents in that process. These problems focus on four basic issues: (a) the perception of the parent of their child's giftedness; (b) their perception of their responsibility in relation to the school's responsibility in the education of the child; (c) the actual instruments which are used in the assessment process; and (d) an underestimation of the potential of the linguistically/culturally different child.

Placement

With regard to placement, each state and district has defined services to gifted students according to individual state standards and funding criteria. Placement in programs which provide special services to the gifted generally involves one of three alternatives: (a) enrichment, (b) grouping, or (c) acceleration. These alternatives may be exercised through the regular or special classroom. Placement, however, is contingent upon assessment results, so in order for it to be appropriate, evaluation must first be accurate. In the placement process, parents also have the right and responsibility to approve the final action. They have the additional privilege of pursuing due process if they are dissatisfied.

Programming

In the programming process, parents of minority gifted children can be of invaluable assistance in helping school officials learn about and appreciate what different cultures value as gifted or talented behaviors.

All children come to school with a great wealth of information and experiences that their teachers know little or nothing about. This is especially true of minority gifted children. The minority gifted child must be made to feel that his culture and experiences are worth while; parents can participate in this process. They can help the classroom teachers capitalize on the experiences and information their minority gifted students bring to school. Torrance (1974) has written that by allowing minority gifted students and their parents to teach others, the curriculum is enriched for all. At the same time, the gifted child is given the chance to teach the things for which he/she is most motivated and at which he/she is most skilled.

Many parents feel deep concern and anxiety when their child is identified as being gifted. This may be doubly true for minority parents, especially those from lower socio-economic and educational levels. Parents of minority gifted children need to be assured that their gifted child is progressing in school. They also should be provided with ideas and materials that will help them help their child. To do this, it is essential to establish communication and information exchange between the home and school. Two ways of establishing this communication are through direct and indirect means.

Direct parent involvement refers to parents coming to the school for conferences, training sessions, and volunteering in the classroom. Because it is currently common for both parents to work, and because more children come from single-parent families, it is important that the schools set up meetings where it is most convenient for the parents, and where the largest turnouts can be expected. While it may be argued by some that all parents will not turn out all the time, most parents are interested in learning

more about how they can help their child progress in school. When counselors, teachers, and other school officials make an effort to include counseling or training sessions in a language or using cultural references understood by minority parents, the parents will feel more encouraged to participate.

Getting the parents of the culturally different gifted students to volunteer in the classroom can be enriching to all students, as another perspective is brought into the classroom. Many minority parents may have talents or gifts of their own that they would share with their child's classmates if given the chance.

Indirect contact with parents means communicating to parents, in a language they understand, the events going on in the classroom or in the school. It also means gathering information about the community and family from the child in a variety of ways.

With gifted children it would be easy and extremely gratifying to the parents to have the children write, illustrate, publish, and take home a newsletter - perhaps a bilingual newsletter - of classroom events. Not only do the parents keep abreast of the children's activities, but this gives the children a chance to further develop their writing, editing, and reading skills, and to put their creativity to good use.

Handbooks explaining school policy in general, and services provided for gifted children in particular, should also be available to parents in terms that they will understand.

The school can work with community agencies that provide special activities for gifted children, compile a list of these agencies and activities, and make it available to parents (Lister & Anderson, 1981).

It is important not only that parents know about the schools but that schools learn about the children's background and family. Knowing a gifted

child's background and more about his family will facilitate in implementing a curriculum that enhances the child's strengths and helps him develop his weaknesses.

In conclusion, the involvement of the family in the identification and in the education of its children is desirable and beneficial. When children are exceptional, and gifted, in particular, this involvement becomes even more critical. It is imperative, however, that educators and other professionals consider especially the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the family when involving parents in identification, assessment, placement and programming processes.

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